

“Responding to the Birth of Christ”

Date: January 7, 2018 **Place:** Lakewood UMC **Occasion:** Epiphany Sunday
Text: Matthew 2:1-12 **Theme:** Worship or Reject Christ

Telling the story of Christ’s birth is not enough for Matthew. He also talked about two reactions to the birth of the Messiah. The first reaction, as Matthew told it, was from the magi who came from the East to Jerusalem asking the question, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews?”

It is difficult to tell, for certain, what Matthew meant by *magi*. He could have been referring to Zoroastrian priests who had the ability to interpret dreams. Or possibly men who practiced various forms of magic.

In the Old Testament they were referred to as enchanter, astronomers and interpreters of dreams. The term *magi* also refers to a large number of people engaged in the practice of the occult.

Since Matthew depicts the magi as having seen a star, it is highly possible that they were astrologers from beyond Palestine. Regardless of their *exact* identity, when the magi found Jesus, they bowed down and paid him homage, presenting him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

In each of these gifts there is rich symbolism and deep meaning. Thankfully the magi did not bring the child a toy or a teething ring. They brought gifts which expressed their hope for the Christ Child.

One of the treasure boxes contained gold, which was the king of metals, because they wanted Jesus to be the “King of kings.” The gift of gold was presented because the magi wanted Bethlehem’s babe to become Lord of life.

The second gift was frankincense, an aromatic gum resin used for incense by the priests. There is the possibility the magi were expressing their hope that the baby would become like a priest, who used the frankincense. The chief role of a priest is to build bridges between God and people. The wise men

wanted the son of God to be a bridge builder, who would connect God to all people and all people to each other.

The third gift contained myrrh, an odd gift it was. Myrrh was used in the ancient world to embalm the dead and as a symbol of suffering. These gentile astrologers wanted their Messiah to be the kind of Lord who would suffer for his people.

They did not want a Christ who would dodge a cross, be protected from the hurts of humanity, or fail to identify with the lonely and alienated. They wanted a Savior who would suffer for, and take upon himself the sufferings of humanity.

A central concept that Matthew wanted to convey in his telling of the birth of Christ is that some reacted to the birth of Jesus with acceptance and devotion. He does this by showing that the first to pay homage to the new born King of the Jews were Gentiles from the East. In these magi, Matthew anticipated all those who would respond to Christ's birth by paying him homage, and worshiping him.

But there was a second reaction to the birth of Christ. After worshiping the newborn Jesus, the Wise Men, being warned in a dream went home another way. They did not go back and tell Herod what they had seen. Herod was furious and ordered the killing of all the baby boys, two years old and younger.

Herod responded to the birth of Christ, not by paying him homage, but by plotting to kill the Child. Therein lays a paradox: Herod, the chief priests and the scribes – people who have scriptures and can plainly see what the prophets have said – are not willing to worship the newborn king.

Thus we have a two-fold reaction to the birth of Christ. The Wise Men of the Gentiles accept and pay homage, but the ruler of Jerusalem and all the

chief priests and scribes of the people do not believe. Rather, they conspire against Jesus, and seek to put him to death.

It is not difficult to understand *why* Herod responded as he did. His kingdom was threatened by the possibility of a new king. The possibility of being displaced did not bring him great joy, but instead brought fear. If this Child was truly the Messiah, it would alter all that Herod believed to be important.

Whenever, and wherever, the message of Christ is taken into the world there is the possibility that it will be met with rejection. The message of Jesus often brings peace, but it also brings trouble. Even in our contemporary society, Christ's message of love, justice and peace invades our kingdoms of selfishness, pride, power and injustice.

"The Herods" continue to stalk the world trying to discover ways to silence the message, distort the message, confuse the message, or change it to suit their own purposes.

Therefore, there are two reactions to the appearance of the newborn Christ: homage and rejection, those who seek to worship Him and those who seek to destroy him and his message.

But it is too easy and clean to say that some respond by giving as did the Magi, while others react by opposing the meaning of the birth of Christ, as did Herod. Not one person among us today is entirely like the Magi. Nor is anyone of us exactly like Herod. We are, at best, a mixture of devotion and denial. We are neither one nor the other, but an uneasy mixture of both.

Many country music singers understand the mixed nature which exists in humankind. While on stage, the country musician can sing about sex, lust, cheating, gambling and unfaithfulness, and then close the program by singing

“Amazing Grace,” or some other song which speaks to faith. Country music is honest music; it tells it like it is

And the contradiction between the rough and tumble life, and the faith of the singer is shockingly apparent, but ever so typical of how we really are. What happens on the country music stage is a microcosm of what much of our life is like.

For six days in every week we live sinful, broken lives and then sing the hymns of faith with great feeling on Sunday morning. In spite of the hell we have either created, or been through, we flock to Christmas Eve services with faith welling up within us. In spite of the alienation and despair we either cause or experience, we insist upon attaching ourselves to the community of believers.

On Epiphany Sunday we celebrate the manifestation of God through Christ to the Gentiles. But let us know, that God is revealed to both Herod *and* the Gentile astrologers. It is God’s nature to come to us, to search us out, to meet us on the journey, to make Godself known to us.

It is God’s nature not to be known by a few people, but by the multitudes. God yearns to be known, and that is the reason the Wise Men found Jesus. And having experienced the living God, they returned home by a different route. If we have really experienced God during these days of Christmas, we will return home as different people, who travel by a different way. Amen? Amen!

This sermon borrows heavily from *The Whisper of Christmas* by Joe E. Pennel, Jr. Nashville, TN: The Upper Room, 1984. “Responding to Christ’s Birth,” pp. 95-117.